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FM AMEMBASSY RANGOON

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 5780  
INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE  
RUEHGG/UN SECURITY COUNCIL COLLECTIVE  
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 0194  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 000211

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STATE FOR EAP AND IO; PACOM FOR FPA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/01/2017

TAGS: PGOV PREL BM

SUBJECT: BURMA: REGIME RELEASES DETAINED PROTESTERS

REF: RANGOON 185

Classified By: P/E Chief Leslie Hayden for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Late on February 27, the police released all those detained for participating in last week's public protest against deteriorating economic and social conditions in Burma (reftel). The regime had arrested nine people and detained many of the participants' family members after the initial demonstration. Arrestees reported to us that they were interrogated separately by Police Special Branch at their headquarters in Rangoon. Each of the participants were asked the same three questions: What country sponsored the demonstration, were the demonstrators paid in U.S. dollars, and did the protesters rush to the U.S. Embassy to declare political asylum?

¶2. (C) One of the participants told us he responded to his interrogators that the demonstration was not sponsored by any country. He told Special Branch that the group demonstrated because the regime permitted other groups to demonstrate in front of the U.S. and UK Embassies to express the "people's desire" to oppose U.S. and UK sponsorship of a Burma resolution in the UN Security Council. Their group also wanted to express the people's desire for more electricity, lower prices, justice, and an end to government corruption. He told his interrogators that no demonstrators had fled to the U.S. Embassy for political asylum, and pointed out that this should be obvious as most of those arrested were hunted down and detained at or right after the demonstration. None were found at the U.S. Embassy.

¶3. (C) Before they were released, the demonstrators were asked to sign a statement noting that their protest was illegal because it involved a gathering of more than five people. They were warned to seek official permission for any future demonstrations. The Special Branch officers informed them that all requests to demonstrate in front of the U.S. and UK Embassies to protest those countries' foreign policies would be granted. Those detained said they were not treated harshly.

¶4. (SBU) After the demonstration, both the National League for Democracy and the 88 Generation Students released statements calling for the regime to release the protesters.

The 88 Generation Students's statement cleverly noted that regime-controlled media supported and praised those who demonstrated in front of the U.S. and British Embassies, while the regime arrested participants of last week's demonstration for a similar peaceful protest. Possibly in response to this statement, 88 Generation Students leader Min Ko Naing was asked to meet with Burma's Police Chief, Khin Yi, on February 26. Noting his busy schedule, Min Ko Naing declined to attend the meeting, but he expects the police may soon send officers to escort him to see Khin Yi.

¶5. (C) The demonstrators told us they specifically chose to focus on Burma's deteriorating economic conditions to gain wide-spread sympathy. They told one contact that the police agreed the protesters had selected non-political topics. Corruption is also an issue the regime purports to be tackling. The demonstrators chose a conciliatory tone, and did not criticize the senior Generals in order to make it harder for any charges of insurrection to stick. 88 Generation leaders are telling us more demonstrations are likely, and that their organization will form a support group to help family members of demonstrators whom the regime detains.

¶7. (C) Comment: The public demonstration and the regime's response are the talk of Rangoon. Many believe that the large crowd the protesters attracted, the international attention generated by the arrests, and the regime's fear of more demonstrations contributed to its decision to release the protesters quickly. Others ascribe the release to the recent visit of the Chinese State Councilor and/or the recently concluded ILO agreement. The regime was also faced with explaining why some demonstrators are more equal than

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others, after publicizing their own poorly-received "public" protests at the US and UK Embassies the week before. Meanwhile, the pro-democracy opposition is once again assessing its next steps. The demonstration appears to have energized and emboldened younger members and those who believe that the time has come to take more action. End comment.

VILLAROSA